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Resilience & AI Innovation Within The VCSE Sector: A Case Study

1. Preface From Community360's CEO

The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector has long occupied a distinctive and essential place within society: responding to need, strengthening communities, and supporting those often left behind by markets and institutions. Yet the environment in which the sector operates is changing rapidly. Artificial Intelligence (AI), once viewed as a distant or specialised technology, is now reshaping how organisations across the economy deliver services, manage resources, and engage with people. In this context, the question is no longer whether AI will influence the VCSE sector, but how the sector can harness it in ways consistent with its values, mission, and social purpose.

Across the UK, AI adoption is accelerating within government, business, and public services, driving new expectations around efficiency, responsiveness, and innovation. For VCSE organisations — historically constrained by funding pressures and rising demand — AI presents not merely a technological shift, but a strategic opportunity. Used thoughtfully, AI tools may enhance organisational capacity, reduce administrative burdens, and enable staff to focus more fully on relational, human-centred work. At stake is not simply competitiveness, but resilience: the ability of organisations to sustain impact in an increasingly complex and resource-constrained landscape.

There is also a generational dimension to this transition. Emerging "technology-born" generations are entering workplaces, volunteering environments, and service-user communities with fundamentally different expectations of digital interaction. For these cohorts, AI-enabled systems, automation, and intelligent interfaces are not novel — they are normative. The sector's ability to remain accessible, credible, and engaging will therefore depend in part on its willingness to adapt to evolving technological realities while preserving the relational ethics that define its work.

This research is guided by a simple but consequential premise: that AI, when implemented responsibly, can function as a capacity-enhancing tool rather than a replacement for human judgement or care. By exploring practical applications within the VCSE context, this study seeks to contribute to an ongoing conversation about how the sector can navigate technological change not defensively, but confidently — aligning innovation with social value, and efficiency with equity.

Cristina Huddleston
CEO, Community360

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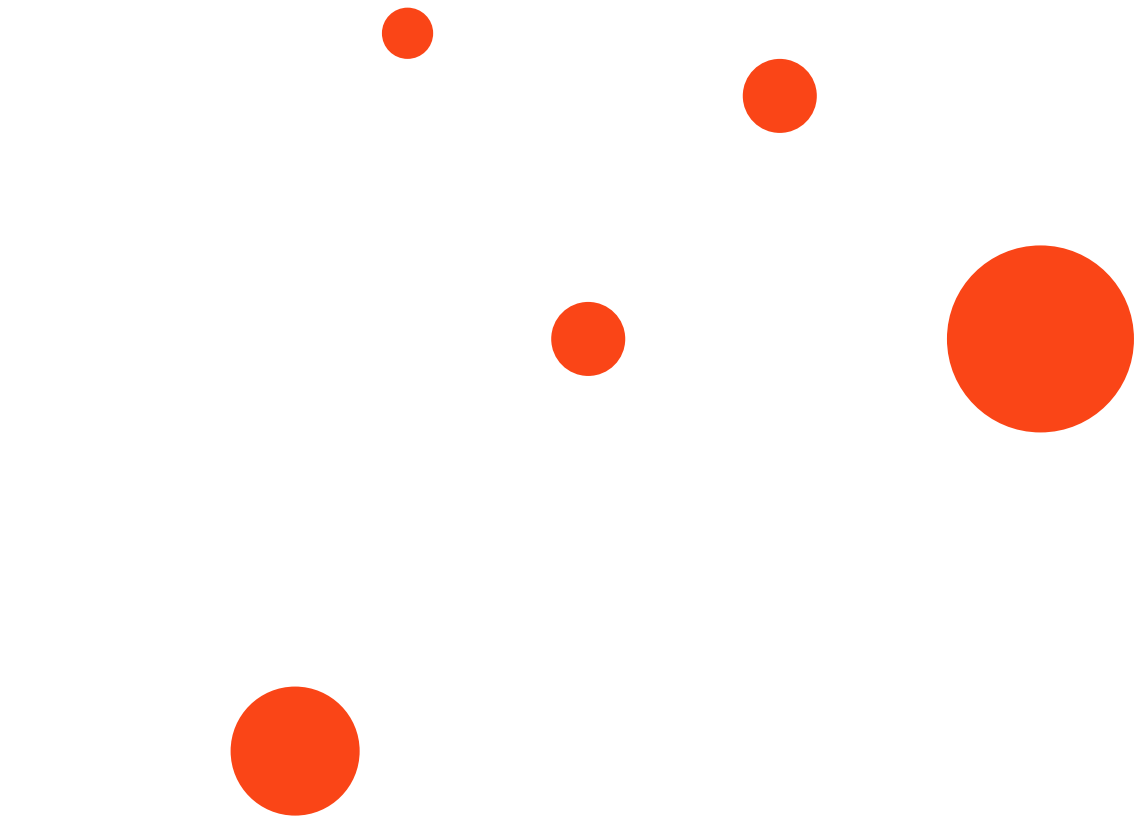
2. Recommendations: Opening Up Conversations Within The VCSE Sector Regarding The Usages Of AI

1. Collaborating Across The Sector: Build and develop new understanding around how AI can enhance organisational resilience and be implemented into organisations to build further resilience in innovative ways, as well as enhance the delivery of charitable missions. With limited funding across a strained sector, resources need to be pooled together to understand the possibilities of AI adoption for organisations. Gate keeping information will only impede upon growth and the clear benefits which AI can provide to the sector's resilience.

2. Develop Sector-Wide AI Strategy: Develop a sector wider, collaborative AI strategy which identifies opportunities for partnerships, innovation and strategic implementation to ensure future growth of the sector. Lobby funders and Governmental bodies to include the Sector within its AI strategies and decision making processes going forward, to ensure the VCSE sector is not left behind.

3. Responsible Usage Within The VCSE Sector: Begin to develop a sector wide ethical AI usage approach, providing a framework to mitigate some of the risks associated with AI and tear down any barriers of mistrust to adoption, which organisations can leverage within their own implementation and to ensure organisations within the sector can make the most of AI.



3. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption has accelerated rapidly across the UK economy, largely driven by improvements in system capability, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 432,000 UK organisations have adopted at least one AI-enabled technology (ONS, 2023). Adoption spans diverse sectors including legal services, finance and accounting, IT and telecommunications, manufacturing, transport, and education (UK Government, 2022). AI uptake is also growing within civil society. Survey evidence indicates that 44% of small charities and 64% of large charities were either using or actively planning to use AI tools in 2023 (Charity Excellence Framework, 2024). Reported benefits include:

- **Improved productivity and operational efficiency**
- **Enhanced personalisation of service-user interactions**
- **Streamlined fundraising and communications processes**
- **Faster research, analysis, and administrative support (Coates, 2023)**

This growth mirrors broader public sector adoption and governmental AI strategy. Government departments and Westminster bodies have increasingly integrated AI and advanced analytics into operational functions. Examples include the use of machine learning and data analytics within the Home Office, digital transformation initiatives across central government, and widespread deployment of AI-enabled business intelligence tools such as Power BI across policing, local authorities, and national statistical services (UK Government, 2023; DSIT, 2024). These developments reflect the UK Government's strategic position that AI represents a central driver of economic growth, public service modernisation, and productivity improvement. Significant national investment further signals policy direction. The UK Government has committed substantial funding toward AI research, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks, alongside the establishment of dedicated bodies such as the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and the AI Safety Institute (DSIT, 2024). Collectively, these initiatives position AI not as an experimental technology, but as an increasingly standard component of organisational capability. For VCSE sector organisations, this shifting landscape has important implications. The sector has historically operated under persistent funding constraints, creating structural pressures on staffing, service delivery, and administrative capacity. In this context, AI tools present a potential capacity-enhancing mechanism, enabling organisations to automate routine workflows, augment staff productivity, and improve decision-support functions at comparatively low marginal cost. Emerging evidence suggests that generative AI tools may increase individual productivity by approximately 6%–25%, with average gains around 15% per staff member per day, depending on task type and implementation approach (JRT, 2025). Practical applications include:

- **Supporting fundraising and grant-writing activities**
- **Automating administrative and back-office processes**
- **Enhancing marketing and communications workflows**
- **Providing analytical and research assistance**

Failure to adopt AI where appropriate may therefore generate opportunity costs. As AI-enabled efficiency becomes more widespread, organisations that do not integrate suitable tools risk relative disadvantages in competitiveness, responsiveness, and resource utilisation within an increasingly constrained funding environment. This research builds upon these sectoral developments by examining the potential cost- and time-efficiency of AI adoption within VCSE Sector, using Community360, an infrastructure charity based in Essex as a case study. Through two focused case studies — addressing back-office functionality and agentic AI capacities — the study explores how AI tools may enhance organisational resilience, improve operational efficiency, and mitigate long-standing sector challenges. Understanding the relationship between AI capability and VCSE workplace practices provides a valuable opportunity to identify realistic, risk-aware pathways for adoption, supporting organisational sustainability within a rapidly evolving technological and funding landscape.

4. Community 360: An AI Case Study

4.1 Back Office Functionality

It has been acknowledged that people working within office settings often face a high volume of emails in facilitating collaborative working internally across different teams or externally across organisations (Dilla et al., 2010). Despite this huge benefit, there have been some associated problems within the workplace, including negative workplace stress and interruptions of workflow - often being exacerbated by time pressures to deliver pieces of work, placing strain on work streams and resulting in a decreased productive output (Letmathe and Noll, 2024; CSCW, 2016). Like any other sector which undertakes collaborative partnership working in this way, the same is true within the VCSE sector, but coupling with existing pressures on funding and capacity within the VCSE sector, in our speculation, it may have more significant impacts on already strained financial situations. VCSE workers often are required to undertake multiple roles, stretching their capacity thin, due to increased demand on and reliance on the sector in delivering pieces of work or support and the need for organisations to bring in more money in the volatile sector.

AI advancement has, however, provided the opportunity to reduce the time spent on email management through integration into commonly used email systems, such as Outlook or Google Office Suite. Email prioritisation, summarisation, smart replies, sorting and categorisation, managing scheduling, task extraction and inbox cleanup are all features which are offered by different AI models which can help reduce time spent on email tasks. Research undertaken by the Alan Turing Institute indicates that time spent undertaking email management could be potentially reduced by up to 70% for staff members within the public sector (given their high exposure to routine email management tasks) assuming successful implementation, full integration and widespread staff adoption (Hashem et al., 2025) - providing an opportunity for large aggregate time-saving measures when applied across whole organisations. This provides a clear opportunity for the VCSE to become more resilient. In what follows, we will undertake a case study on Community360 to understand the possible time and cost savings that could be gained within the VCSE sector. Using Hashem et al. (2025)'s findings as a bench mark (due to the overlap the public sector and VCSE sector often has within their schemes of work), we will use self-reported time-spent managing combined email inflow and exflow from staff members at Community360 across all office staff - ranging from social prescribers, transport schedulers, volunteer coordinators, researchers, engagement officers, finance officers, HR staff, and strategic leadership staff - to understand % of time spent on emails across the organisation by working, with a mind to then create illustrative figures that signifies how AI email management practices can help make more efficient use of staff time by eliminating repetitive tasks and then translate that number to cost-savings. This will serve as an estimate to the possible efficacy it could build within the organisation.

Mean % of hours spent on emails p/week across 1 FTE (agg. percentage of total working hours ÷ total FTE): 506.2 % ÷ 24.25 (total FTE) = 20.9%
20.9 % of 1 FTE (37.5 hours) = 7.83 hours per week

Avg. cost of email management across 1 FTE p/week:
7.83 hours x £15.55 (avg. hourly wage) = £121.76

Avg. cost of email management across 1 FTE p/cm:
4 week month: 4 x £121.76 = £487.04
5 week month: 5 x £121.76 = £608.80

Agg. cost across all staff for email management p/cm:
4 week month: £487.04 x 24.25 (total FTE) = £11,810.72
5 week month: £608.80 x 24.25 (total FTE) = £14,763.40

Agg. cost for email management during the 2024 calendar year:
4 x 5 week months: £59,052
8 x 4 week months: £94,532
Total: £153,532

A lot of time was thus spent during the 2024 calendar year by office staff undertaking email management, then translating into a significant amount of money. Now, using Hashem et al.'s (2025) research as a representative baseline, I will conduct an analysis to understand how much time - and thus costs - could be potentially saved by employing the use of AI email management techniques. It is worth noting that Hashem et al.'s figure of 70% was assuming a full implementation and integration of AI email management techniques, so for the purposes of this initial exploratory study, we will undertake a system optimisation approach to ensure this research is grounded in realistic expectations of what could be achieved, whereby time and cost-savings will be calculated for 25%, 50%, 75% and 100% adoption - 17.5%, 35%, 52.5% and 70% time savings respectively - whereby it is assumed that it is adopted by such levels of staff after implementation. Fig.1 below understands the possible cost savings at each of those levels:

	25% System Opt. 17.5% Reduction	50% System Opt. 35% Reduction	75% System Opt. 52.5% Reduction	100% System Opt. 70% Reduction
Hours Reduced Avg. H Across 1 FTE Reduced By Given %	17.5% of 7.83 h = 1.37 h reduced p/w	35% of 7.83 h = 2.74 h reduced p/w	35% of 7.83 h = 2.74 h reduced p/w	70% of 7.83 h = 5.48 h reduced p/w
Cost Saved p/w Reduced Hours x Avg. Wage	1.37 h x £15.55 p/h = £21.31 p/w saved	2.74 h x £15.55 p/h = £42.60 p/w saved	4.11 h x £15.55 p/h = £63.93 p/w saved	5.48 h x £15.55 p/h = £85.24 p/w saved
Cost Savings P/ 4 Week Month (1 FTE) Cost Saved P/W x 4	4 x £21.31 saved p/w = £85.21	4 x £42.60 saved p/w = £170.62	4 x £63.93 saved p/w = £255.63	4 x £85.24 saved p/w = £340.96
Cost Savings P/ 5 Week Month (1 FTE) Cost Saved P/W x 5	5 x £21.31 saved p/w = £106.52	5 x £42.60 saved p/w = £213.04	5 x £63.93 saved p/w = £319.56	5 x £85.24 p/w saved = £426.08
Cost Saved P/Year (1 FTE) 4 x Cost P/5 Week Month + 8 x Cost P/4 Week Month	4 x cost p/ 5 week month + 8 x cost p/ 4 week month = £1,107.76 costs saved p/year	4 x cost p/ 5 week month + 8 x cost p/ 4 week month = £2215.52 costs saved p/year	4 x cost p/ 5 week month + 8 x cost p/ 4 week month = £3323.28 costs saved p/year	4 x cost p/ 5 week month + 8 x cost p/ 4 week month = £4431.04 costs saved p/year
Agg. Cost Saved Across All Staff P/ Year (24.25 FTE) Cost Saved P/Year (1 FTE) x 24.25	£1,107.76 x 24.25 = £26,863.18 agg. cost saved p/year	£2215.52 x 24.25 = £53,726.36 agg. cost saved p/year	£3323.28 x 24.25 = £80,589.54 agg. cost saved p/year	£4431.04 x 24.25 = £107,452.72 agg. cost saved p/year

Fig. 1: Possible Time and Cost Savings using AI Email Management across Levels of System Optimisation

These representative figures thus demonstrate significant cost savings by employing the use of AI email management across the organisation at any level of system optimisation. Organisation wide AI licensing in the UK market costs between £5,000-15,000 per year for basic AI solutions (AI Development Costs in the UK, 2026), meaning that even at the 25% system optimisation a significant net saving could be achieved when licensing costs are considered - saving individual employees time as well as organisational resources which could then be redirected to other areas.

It is not just organisationally that these time savings provide benefit, however, but also on an operational level. During the data collection for the above figures, one of the more extreme cases of self-reported time spent on emails highlighted some pressures which email management places upon their roles which are important to be highlighted here. Participant One reported the most time spent across the organisation at 15 h p/w within their full time (37.5 h p/w) role - totalling 40% of their total time. They reported that, due to increasing contract demands and challenges with staffing within their team, they were managing three inboxes where referrals and professional emails are received as part of their role. Taken in part of with other operational aspects, strategic aspects and line management responsibilities of their role, they reported often feeling under pressure within their role due to a lack of time: "Managing three, often overflowing, inboxes is a challenge: it does feel as if I do not get much breathing room". Taking this example forward, the implementation of AI email management solutions provides an opportunity to free time for this staff member to undertake other aspects of their role, in addition to also improving overall employee wellbeing in aiding this particular staff member to reduce any overwhelming feelings they may have as a result of email volume and admin (Letmathe and Noll, 2024) - not to mention the possible cost savings as outlined above that may come as a result from this particular person who is in a higher pay band within the organisation.

Understanding these time and cost savings in a substantive way may be difficult, as consistently monitoring this data would be time consuming and may be liable to unreliable data. So what benefits can be drawn from this illustrative analysis for an organisation? One way is freeing up the time of individuals to undertake strained organisational requirements. Within this data, the most time spent managing emails was amongst our Senior Leadership Team (SLT): in total, 63 hours per week were reported to be spent on emails across 9 SLT members. Even at a 50% system optimization (35% reduction), there is a possibility of saving 22.05 hours per week or 0.59 FTE each week. If we apply this time over the course of a month, we would have 2.36 FTE worth of time freed up to work on important organisational functions, such as fundraising or marketing, improving upon the organisations overall financial standing through bid writing or donor engagement or raising awareness of their work to perspective donors respectively - providing a clear financial incentive to integrating email management across the organisation, despite difficulties in monitoring directly the impact of AI email management systems.

4.2 Agentic AI, Capacity And Skills

Another efficiency between AI and the VCSE sector lies within AI agents: autonomous AI models powered by large language models (LLMs) which can perform complex workflows or multi-step projects through their capacity to reason, plan and take actions, acting as another virtual employee who can perform tasks efficiently and effectively with minimal human oversight. AI agents have various applications in a range of areas: marketing and content creation, HR support, governance coordination, legal advice, copy writing, customer service and data analysis are all within scope for AI systems to enhance existing workplace practices - therefore presenting the opportunity to bring in AI models to undertake complex workplace tasks rather than hiring someone for a whole new role (along with the associated costs) or bringing in a consultant who may often be more expensive (see below for more analysis on this).

AI agents here are distinct from AI assistants in an important way: "AI assistants are reactive, performing tasks at your request. AI agents are proactive, working autonomously to achieve a specific goal by any means at their disposal" (IBM, Last Accessed December 2025). AI assistants are very reductive in their make up, whereas Agentic AI models retain the capacity to act to some extent autonomously with minimal prompting to a specific end. Agentic AI presents a potentially transformative opportunity for VCSE organisations by enabling automation of complex, multi-step tasks that would traditionally require dedicated staff or external consultants. However, benefits depend heavily on selecting appropriate AI capabilities, managing risks, and accounting for hidden implementation costs. Different roles require different levels of AI models for effective operations, with some more complex tasks requiring more complicated or autonomous agentic AI models.

The Gartner Report distinguished between these different levels of AI models, along with their task specifications:

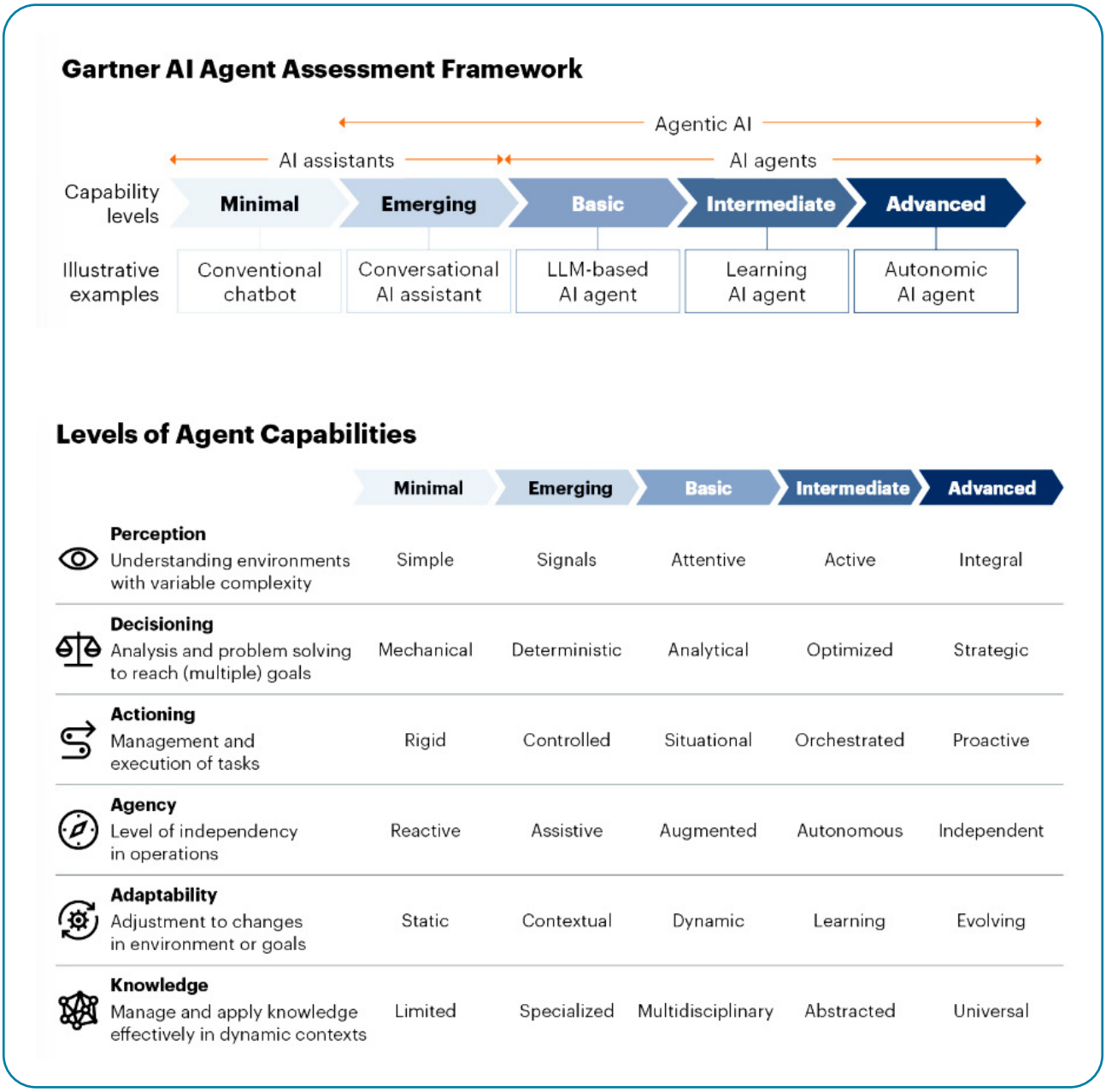


Fig. 2: The Gartner Report (2025): Last Accessed December 2025

This framework understands Agentic AI (and its capabilities) as a spectrum, rather than properties an AI model either has or does not have. Such a framework has important implications for understanding the possibility of implementing AI models within the VCSE sector, as proper diagnostic analysis is required to ensure that organisations do not over-resource or under prescribe AI solutions in what is a fragile sector for many organisations. For our purposes, it is then important to understand what levels of AI models are required to undertake certain work streams within the VCSE sector if we are to understand the cost-efficacy of employing such models. As such, an analysis of common organisational requirements/roles for a few (but certainly not exhaustive) common needs within the VCSE Sector using the capabilities framework as shown above:

Marketing And Content Creation: Depending on the intended usage of AI within this arena, the AI solution can be more or less agentic. On one hand, if an AI Assistant is required to aid in post creation and promotion to be sent out through communications channels, adhering to a marketing strategy with human insight, then agent capabilities required will be more minimal, although emerging levels of agency, contextual adaptability and specialised knowledge will be required. On the other hand, if the requirements for the AI solution is to act more autonomously, with a more minimal level of human oversight, playing a more dynamic role in strategising and creating content-based on external environments and changing organisational priorities, then higher levels of intermediate capabilities will be required, due to the risk of minimal human interaction within outward facing functions.

Legal Work: Within work-streams which require active legal advice, AI can be a useful tool to understand an organisation's legal position in what can be complex situations through legal research, contract analysis in identifying potential risks or inconsistencies,document automation and case strategy. Given the complex nature of many legal cases -as well as the subsequent risk posed to the organisation if a case were to go wrong -capabilities will need to be at a minimum level of basic or intermediate, to allow for dynamic reasoning of the model to provide legal assistance which poses the least amount of risk and is relevant to the given legal situation.

Governance And Compliance: AI assistance within the governance and compliance processes can provide a fast and accessible regulatory change management function within an organisation, providing policy analysis, risk assessment and monitoring, audit preparation and employee training oversight, taking the burden away from other staff in staying compliant in a more timely fashion. These tasks require lower levels of dynamic reasoning, given they are primarily ensuring they are in line with national regulations and keeping to required timelines, a lower level AI assistant is required, with capabilities falling in line with emerging levels, except reasoning which needs to be analytical are the minimum.

Correspondingly, the implementation of these AI models within organisations presents the opportunity for effective cost savings. Cost comparisons below are illustrative estimates only. Actual savings depend on workload, implementation costs, oversight requirements, training requirements and organisational capacity:

Marketing Officer:

c. £30,000 per year to employ a marketing professional plus additional costs (recruitment costs, pension contributions, training costs, etc..)

AI Marketing Assistant: entry level subscriptions between £30-100 p/cm, complex enterprise solution at £1000+ p/cm, custom solutions at £10,000+: plus additional costs for AI governance/infrastructure.

Legal AI:

c. £150-200 p/hour plus VAT for legal advice from an experienced solicitor outside of London; £145-170 plus VAT for paralegal p/hour

AI Legal Platforms: Simple AI Assistants from £40-80 p/cm; £400-1600 p/cm for advanced platforms - hidden costs for functions like contract analysis which may cost more

Governance And Compliance:

c.£30,000 for a professional undertaking this kind of work.

AI Plans: Basic £70 p/cm plans for regulatory bench marking

It is important to note that there are secondary costs to implementing AI into organisational infrastructure in this way, which need to be of consideration when understanding the cost efficacy of implementing agentic AI:

- AI governance and policy development
- Staff training and onboarding
- Integration with existing systems
- Oversight and validation time
- Data protection and compliance measures
- Vendor lock-in / scaling costs

In addition to this cost-evaluative framework, there are some other important factors which need to be considered when considering bringing AI into an organisation. When evaluating AI solutions, organisations should consider:

- **Risk exposure** – Are outputs externally visible or legally sensitive?
- **Oversight requirements** – How easily can outputs be validated?
- **Frequency of task** – Automation benefits repetitive workflows most
- **Failure consequences** – What happens if AI produces errors?

5. Risks of Implementing AI

Despite these possible benefits to VCSE sector organisations, it is not without risk. The UK does not have a specific AI act like the EU has to regulate AI usage, rather UK law takes a "pro-innovation approach" to AI regulation which relies on 5 cross-sector principles - safety/security, transparency, fairness, accountability and contestability - for existing regulators to enforce across different sectors whilst maintaining the autonomy for organisations to employ the use of AI in new ways without significantly limiting them and keeping up with international developments in the field (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2023). These principles are context-dependent and can be interpreted in ways befitting the specific use cases by regulators in different areas. Below are a number of key risks which need to be monitored and regulated to ensure compliant and safe AI use for organisations based on these principles:

Data Protection

Risk: Security And Data Breaches: AI models, where possibly sensitive data is often in-putted for various tasks such as data analysis or case management, creates a new vulnerability which could be exploited to obtain such data. New attempts to hack models - through model inversion attacks or membership inference attacks - mean adequate levels of cyber security may be required (ICO: Last Accessed December 2025).

Mitigations:

1. **Apply data minimisation** – Only input information that is strictly necessary for the task. Limiting data exposure reduces the potential impact of breaches or misuse.
2. **Avoid entering sensitive or personally identifiable data** – Personal, confidential, or sensitive organisational information should not be entered into AI tools unless there is a clear operational need and appropriate safeguards are in place.
3. **Conduct regular cybersecurity and privacy risk assessments** – AI systems introduce evolving technical risks. Periodic assessments help identify vulnerabilities and ensure controls remain effective.

Risk: Purpose Limitation: AI models are trained on vast amounts of data and learn from that data to improve later responses. UK GDPR legalisation however limits the retention of data only for the intended purpose at collection. Without a compatible legal basis for re-use, any replication by AI models will constitute a violation of GDPR (ICO: Last Accessed December 2025).

Mitigations:

1. **Use AI tools with no-training / no-retention configurations** – Where available, these settings prevent user inputs from being stored or used to further train models, reducing compliance risks.
2. **Establish clear internal guidance on acceptable data inputs** – Staff should understand what types of data can and cannot be used with AI systems to avoid inadvertent GDPR violations, ensuring compliance with GDPR regulations.
3. **Maintain records of AI-supported data processing activities** – Documenting AI usage strengthens accountability, auditability, and regulatory defensibility.

Output Accuracy:

Risk: AI 'Hallucinations': It has been documented that AI models, especially generative models, can sometimes produce false or misinformed information which is presented as factual (Farquhar et al., 2024) leading to a reduction in credibility and reliability of AI outputs.

Mitigations:

1. **Require human review for factual or high-stakes outputs** – AI-generated content may appear credible but can contain inaccuracies. Human validation remains essential.
2. **Cross-check AI-generated information** – Verification against trusted sources reduces the risk of relying on incorrect outputs.
3. **Position AI as a support tool** – Framing AI as assistive technology helps manage expectations and risk exposure.

Risk: Bias and Discrimination: Historical and social biases contained within the data sets which an AI model is trained upon may also be reproduced within their outputs, perpetuating existing forms of biases or discrimination (ICO: Last Accessed December 2025).

Mitigations:

1. **Review outputs for fairness and unintended bias** – Maintain human oversight of AI assisted process to identify such outcomes. Provide training to identify such biases.
2. **Develop an Outcomes Monitoring Process** – Outcome-based monitoring helps detect risks that may not be visible at the system level. Form action team to review key outcomes.

Risk: Intellectual Property Infringement: AI models may reproduce copyrighted content during outputs, posing legal risks for the organisation employing its use (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2024).

Mitigations:

1. **Avoid publishing AI-generated content without review**
2. **Use AI primarily for drafting and ideation** – Limiting use reduces legal and reputational exposure.
3. **Establish approval processes for external content** – Formal review protects against IP and accuracy risks.
4. **Provide staff guidance on copyright considerations** – Awareness reduces inadvertent misuse.

Given these risks that AI presents, it is thus imperative that an organisation wishing to implement AI into their workflows guarantee risk mitigation through the proper governance, organisational policy procedures and infrastructure to support the practice, lest they face legal consequences for improper usage. This is especially true within the VCSE sector, where sensitive data is often handled to support communities or the sector more widely, possibly being very damaging to beneficiaries if inaccurate or bias-ridden data is employed or if such data is obtained during a breach.

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Matthew Mason is a Development Manager at Community360 and a PhD Candidate within the Department of Government at the University of Essex. Across his different roles, his research primarily focuses on efficient system working and access across public health contexts and community organising practices, as well as democratic theory more broadly, although recently his work has turned towards AI adoption in different contexts. Through his work, he has influenced health policy at regional levels across different contexts, ensuring that patients have the opportunity and capacity to access effective services to drive positive health outcomes.

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